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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000904

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [LE](#) [IS](#) [SA](#)  
SUBJECT: JUMBLATT ASSURES HARIRI HE WILL SUPPORT THE  
MAJORITY

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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11. (C) Progressive Socialist Party leader Walid Jumblatt on August 12 confirmed that his bloc remains within the "15" (majority) in the 15-10-5 Cabinet formula, reiterating what he told Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri the night before. Both Siniora and caretaker Minister of State Nassib Lahoud admitted separately that Jumblatt's actions further complicated the already byzantine government formation process. Siniora worried that forming a government quickly would be to Hizballah's advantage, and he remained concerned that in doing so Hariri might make too many concessions. Siniora did not believe Jumblatt had put the final nail in the March 14 Coalition's coffin, and asserted that March 14 still had a role to play in Lebanon's crowded political arena. However, both Siniora and Lahoud fretted that the protracted government formation process was providing an opening for Syria to regain its footing in Lebanon. End summary.

JUMBLATT: 15-10-5  
FORMULA STILL HOLDS  
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12. (C) Progressive Socialist Party leader Walid Jumblatt confirmed in an August 12 meeting with the Ambassador and PolOff the 15-10-5 Cabinet formula remains unchanged-- and that his bloc remains within the majority 15 --reiterating what he told Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri the night before. A visibly tired and chastened Jumblatt said Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun remains the sole obstacle to Cabinet formation. "We are now back to square one." Jumblatt also confirmed his plan to meet with March 14 Secretariat Secretary General Faris Souaid soon. Jumblatt seemed relieved to be over the tumult of the last nine days and was reluctant to discuss the issue in any detail. Instead, he focused on Aoun's obstructionism. "Aoun has lost the election, but he doesn't realize it." Jumblatt speculated that either Hizballah or Syria was at the root of Aoun's intransigence, but he admitted that Hariri was not willing to meet Aoun's central demand and concede the Telecommunications Ministry to the FPM leader's son-in-law

Gebran Bassil.

13. (C) Jumblatt had assured Hariri the evening before that he would respect the results of the June 2009 National Assembly election and will support the majority in the next cabinet, according to Hariri's chief of staff Nader Hariri. Saad also asserted that Hizballah and its allies need to approach Cabinet negotiations with a unified strategy and not in a piecemeal manner, referring to his ongoing battle over portfolio distribution with Aoun. According to Nader, Aoun's repeated demands for the Ministry of Interior was "off the table." (Note: Saad Hariri met with Hizballah political advisor Hussein Khalil August 11 evening, following his meeting with Jumblatt. End note.)

14. (C) Caretaker Prime Minister Fouad Siniora told Ambassador and Poloff in a separate meeting August 12 that Hariri must be firm in offering Hizballah and its allies a group of portfolios that they can divide among themselves. "Otherwise, he is between a rock and a hard place." However, both Siniora and caretaker Minister Nassib Lahoud insisted it was impossible to consider Jumblatt a part of the majority bloc, with Siniora cautioning against "pushing him further toward March 8." Siniora remarked bleakly that although Hariri had weathered the recent storm, he is still in a precarious position.

#### JUMBLATT'S DEFECTION WEAKENS THE PRESIDENT

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15. (C) Siniora admitted that Jumblatt's actions had surprised  
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him and further complicated the already byzantine government formation process. Not only had Jumblatt delayed the Cabinet formation, but he also undermined the role of President Michel Sleiman. "(Sleiman) is no longer the man that can tip the balance," Siniora said. He argued that Jumblatt had done more damage than was readily apparent and complained the Druze leader was being typically unpredictable. Siniora believed Jumblatt's actions stemmed from his frustration with a diminished role within the March 14 Coalition. "He is no longer the sole decision maker, and he's frustrated. He wants to be the force that tips the balance." According to Siniora, March 14 no longer held a parliamentary majority, and Sleiman was not in a position to exercise a swing vote. "Now Walid Jumblatt can play that role."

16. (C) For his part, Presidential advisor Nazem Khoury agreed that Jumblatt is now the "guarantor" who effectively replaces the role imagined for the presidential bloc. In reality, Khoury told PolChief on August 12, the government will "make ends meet" by avoiding all controversial issues. Khoury defended President Sleiman's passive posture in government formation by saying the he would step in if there were a "crisis" and seeks to avoid impinging on the role of the PM-designate.

#### SINIORA: HASTE IN GOVERNMENT FORMATION WILL MAKE HARIRI A "SITTING DUCK"

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17. (C) Opinions vary on the wisdom of accelerating the pace of cabinet negotiations. Siniora insisted that Hizballah is eager to form a government quickly to its advantage, and he remained concerned that in doing so Hariri would make too many concessions, thereby negating March 14's electoral success. Siniora was worried Hariri would become a "sitting duck" in the next cabinet. Nader Hariri agreed with Siniora's assessment of Hizballah's motives, although he did not see a quick end to the government formation process as detrimental to Hariri's premiership. Lahoud argued Hariri had more to lose the longer the process took.

18. (C) Siniora conceded that there has been little progress on the distribution of portfolios. He endorsed the promotion

of technocratic ministers and warned Hizballah would attempt to appoint ministers who were technocrats but also "highly politicized." Siniora argued that Hariri should retain the Ministries of Energy and Water and Telecommunications for his bloc, the former because any incremental success will be perceived as a victory for the Prime Minister, the latter for security purposes. Lahoud agreed that Hariri should push for the Energy and Water portfolio, and he said all Cabinet decisions had been settled with the exception of Aoun's demands. According to both Jumblatt and Lahoud, Hariri would attempt to offer Aoun the Education Ministry in exchange for the Telecommunications portfolio. Lahoud added that Bassil will almost certainly be in the next Cabinet, and he said former Minister of Economy and Trade (1995-98) and Transport and Public Works (2004-05) Yasin Jaber could resurface as the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

¶9. (C) Siniora did not believe Jumblatt had put the final nail in March 14's coffin, and he argued the March 14 Coalition still had a role to play in Lebanon's crowded political arena. "It's a way of reconciling Christians with the Arab Cause and Muslims with the Lebanese cause," Siniora argued. However, he admitted all Lebanese confessional groups were taking more "offensive" positions. He also worried that Jumblatt's contribution to the protracted government formation process would provide an opening for Syria to regain its footing in Lebanon, a sentiment that Lahoud echoed. Siniora maintained that he hoped to have strong relationship with Syria, but one based on respect that recognizes Lebanon's sovereignty. "Syria always has to be reminded that Lebanon is an independent state." According to Siniora all other issues -- including the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon's (UNIFIL) mandate and a

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reexamination of the President's powers -- would take a back seat to government formation.

COMMENT

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¶10. (C) In the wake of Jumblatt's return to the fold, both Siniora and Lahoud seem to be taking a darker view than Hariri of the long-term impact of the Druze leader's recent machinations. For its part, Hizballah has raised public calls for immediate government formation while as yet declining to offer names for its ministerial portfolios. The President, meanwhile, appears to have stepped back from active participation in the process. Despite ongoing speculation and rumor mongering about when a government will take shape and who will be in it, hopes for the quick formation of an effective government are waning as the process enters its second month. End comment.  
SISON